

DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE BLOGGERS ROUNDTABLE WITH COLONEL JEFFREY M. HAYNES, USMC, COMMANDING OFFICER, 201ST REGIONAL CORPS ADVISORY COMMAND CENTRAL, VIA TELECONFERENCE FROM AFGHANISTAN TIME: 9:31 A.M. EDT DATE: THURSDAY, OCTOBER 2, 2008

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SEAMAN WILLIAM SELBY (Office of the Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs): And with that, I'd like to welcome you all to the Department of Defense's Bloggers Roundtable for Thursday, October 2nd, 2008. My name is Seaman William Selby with the Office of the Secretary of Defense, Public Affairs, and I'll be moderating our call today.

A note to the bloggers on the line today: Please remember to clearly state your name and blogger organization in advance of your question; respect our guest's time, keeping questions succinct and to the point.

Today our guest is Marine Corps Colonel Jeffrey Haynes, commanding officer, Regional Corps Advisory Command Central, 201st Corps -- Afghan National Army, who will discuss the progress and momentum of the 201st Corps of the Afghan National Army and the Regional Corps Advisory Command. Sir, if you have an opening statement, you can go ahead with that right now.

COL. HAYNES: Okay. I'll start with just a few minutes. Again, Colonel Haynes, United States Marine Corps, 201st Corps RCAC. And our mission is to train and advise the 201st Corps army soldiers and organizations in combat in Afghanistan. We have 11 provinces in which the 201st Corps operate, and it would be the Eastern Zone. And I'll just hit the 11 provinces very quickly so you know where we are. Basically from the Pak border, Kunar, Nangarhar, Laghman, Nuristan; then working to the west, Panjshir, Kapisa, Kabul province, Parvan province; and then south of Kabul province and south Kabul city is Lowgar; and then to the west of that is Wardak and Bamian.

My command consists of about 750 personnel from all U.S. services except for the Coast Guard. I also have couple hundred French soldiers that are advisers, some Turkish advisers, Portuguese. I have the Latvians inbound and a few Greek staff officers inbound.

And basically from day to day we train and advise the Afghan National Army in their garrison activities and in their operational planning. We conduct combat operations with them and our Marines and other service from all the countries are in the field during combat ops with the ANA platoons, companies, kandaks and brigades.

Of course, we circulate throughout the battlefield and supervise our subordinate teams, because I'm at the corps level and we have teams all the way down to the company level.

And in addition to my staff in particular up at what we call the RCAC level, we all have -- we exercise command over the subordinate teams, but we also counterparts we advise on the corps staff. For example, I'm the corps adviser -- I'm the corps adviser's -- I'm the corps commander's adviser. He is a two-star ANA general. And the rest of my staff, my G-1, G-2, et cetera, have counterparts on the corps staff.

That's all I have for an opening statement.

SEAMAN SELBY: Thank you very much, sir. And Chuck, you were on the line first.

Q Yes. Good evening, sir. Chuck Simmins from America's North Shore Journal. I've been seeing a lot of reports lately about the region to the immediate west of Kabul, even before the battle involving the French soldiers, that would suggest that enemy strength is growing in that area and that the threat to the capital itself has increased. What can you tell us about the immediate capital environs and the threat to the about 50- or a hundred-mile radius around the capital?

COL. HAYNES: Sir, I can start with what you mentioned about the French. That was actually to the east of Kabul City, in the extreme eastern portion of the Kabul province in an area called Sarobi, and there are operations going on in that area. There are some people that need to be taken out of the picture there, and we're working that vigorously. I can tell you to the north of that, in an area called Kapisa Province, we're in the process of removing an enemy safe haven with a very aggressive ANA campaign plan that includes full-spectrum development, road construction, a variety of CMOs -- civil military operations -- and associated activities. The ANA are clearly in the lead in that area, and we are getting a lot of intelligence from the locals. In fact, we've reduced or destroyed several IEDs in the past couple of weeks that have been turned over to us or we have been notified of the location of these IEDs. And that's -- that area I'm talking about is the Tagab District of Kapisa Province, and that's -- that's close to Kabul. So we're clearly -- we're winning the fight there.

To the north of Kabul is Parvan Province and Kohi Safi, and the ANA did the first ever ANA heliborne operation aboard ANA helicopters about a month or so ago that was successful. And then to the -- working over to the west side of Kabul -- yeah, there's some unrest. There's some unrest in Wardak and Lowgar but I will tell you absolutely the threats to Highway 1 immediately south of Kabul through the Wardak area have decreased. We've got ANA doing tremendous work out there, again, on their own, independent, not having their hand held by the coalition in any means whatsoever. And we're having success there.

So it's kind of a myth that the insurgents have surrounded the capital and are enstrangling the capital and all that, that's simply just not happening. Now they are having some hits every now and then around the capital, but that's certainly a perception they want to sew in the minds of the international community and the locals that they've surrounded Kabul, but I'm just not seeing it.

Q Thank you.

MR. SELBY: Thank you, sir.

And Josh, you were on the line?

Q Yes, sir. This is Josh Russo (ph) with the Institute for the Study of War.

My question is, from your perspective, what is the enemy's center of gravity in the provinces to the east of Kabul? And specifically, do you see a coherent Taliban and affiliated element strategy in those provinces working from the Pakistani border toward Kabul? COL. HAYNES: I'm not really seeing a coherent strategy. I mean, they want to give the perception of encircling Kabul. I think that's their IO strategy. But a coherent strategy working, you know, from east to west, you know, from the Kunar River area, I'm not seeing it.

My EPTs out there, advisers and the ANA are having, you know, a lot of success out there. I mean, they're still getting a lot of gunfights, but I'm not seeing a coherent strategy. I'm seeing a smattering of insurgents on various rat lines trying to make their way to Kabul, but as I said before in southern Kapise, in that area, the ANA has come up with a full spectrum development plan that's severing that rat line.

As far as their center of gravity, well, Pakistan's an issue. I don't want to go there right now, but certainly Pakistan is an issue and that's being dealt with to some degree right now. But one of his requirements for success is for him not to be seen by us and him to be able to blend in with the population. And as we continue to drive the wedge between the population and the insurgents, it will be harder and harder for him to operate.

And that's one reason I continue to emphasize the Afghan National Army owning the problem and owning battlespace and being seen by the people, not just in appearance but in capacity, as being able to deliver security to their people. And that's much more important in my mind than strictly the coalition doing it. Obviously it has to be a combination of coalition and ANA, but if the ANA can provide that security, then the ANP, I think, will come a long way to removing that relationship between the insurgents and some of the population.

Q Thank you, sir.

MR. SELBY: And Troy, you were on the line next.

Q Okay. Hey, sir, this is Troy Steward from Bouhammer.com.

First, I want to thank you for coming on with us. I think the 201st ETS -- Marine ETTs have often been overlooked because of the 24th MEU and 2-7. A lot of people don't realize you guys have been on the ground there for a while.

Recently, Colonel -- Lieutenant Colonel Chris Nash, Marine Lieutenant Colonel Chris Nash was featured in an article in Army Times actually just this week talking about a mission in the Nangahar Province where he has personally seen or, you know, is aware of and NDS confirmed Pak mil helos flying support missions into Nangahar -- into Afghanistan airspace. So my questions -- first couple of questions are on that.

You know, were you on the ground during that time? Have you heard of something like this happening before or since then? We know a lot of support comes across from Pak mil, but actual air flights is pretty brazen. Just kind of what your feelings are on that.

COL. HAYNES: I think he was misquoted. I've known Chris Nash for years, and he was misquoted on that. And I'll let him -- you guys can track him down and get him on this Bloggers Roundtable and he can speak for himself. But my understanding, he did not see those helicopters with his own eyes, nor did he claim that. And I think that was potentially him passing on something he had been told by others. But I don't know personally of any Pak mil support to the insurgents. And I'm not out on the border that much. I have been out a few times. And nothing I saw with my own eyes led me to believe that Pak mil was openly supporting the insurgents coming across the border.

I do know my boys out there at JOYSE (ph) get some rockets that originate, you know, right along that border somewhere, and we're awfully concerned about that. They're taking quite a few rockets along the Kunar. But that has slowed down in recent weeks. But Pak mil helicopters and all that, I can't speak to that.

Q Okay. He did mention that they were -- he was pretty sure that -- again, this was his saying, that they received Pak mil D-30 fire. And of course, people can mix up Katyushas with, you know, D-30, I guess. But I mean, that was a quote in there. Maybe he was just quoted wrong, like you said.

But okay, that's all I got for now. I want to give everybody else a chance to ask some additional questions.

SEAMAN SELBY: Now would be a good time for follow-up questions, with Chuck going first, if you like.

Q Yeah. I wanted to ask about the northernmost part of the area that you're working in. As you go farther north in Afghanistan, it seems that the ethnic mix changes. Do you see levels of hospitality for the Taliban, for the al Qaeda -- whatever you want to call them -- do you see that vary north to south based on the ethnic mix?

COL. HAYNES: Yeah, you could say -- you know, it's a mosaic out here in Afghanistan, of course. I was just at Laghman province, which is to the east of Kabul province and north of Nangarhar, Tora Bora area. I was just out in Laghman province, and that's Pashais. And they -- they're a different ethnic group, speak a different language -- somewhat, I understand, related to the Nuristanis.

But the insurgency there didn't seem to be too awfully strong, just a few errant mortar rounds they tried to shoot at a FOB. You've got to remember these insurgents are not -- they're not great fighters. They go head-to-head with our guys, and they get just absolutely slammed every single time.

One of my young Marines nailed two of them the other day with his M4 at about, you know, 10 meters, and the bad guy -- the couple of bad guys behind the rocks and they couldn't even, you know, in an ambush do anything more than graze his arms. You're not talking about really proficient fighters, you're just talking about guys that occasionally are tucked in with the civilian population and may get the drop on our folks. But head to head we'll nail them every time.

But still, to answer your question, I see somewhat in the Pashtun areas maybe a little bit more of big and Taliban-type activity. Naturally you have against southern Kapisa, which is mainly Pashtun. We have more activity there than the Tajik north of Kapisa. In Nuristan you have some reports of foreign fighters going through Nuristan, which is the northern portion of my AO, and that would be obviously Nuristani, which is a different ethnic group, the last to convert to Islam, have always been more distant from the capital than most ethnic groups, to my understanding.

Panjshir, you know, north of Kapisa, those are the Panjshiris. We don't have problems there. That's Massoud's old running grounds, so there aren't a lot of enemy activity. It's not happening in the Panjshir. So you can tie that to the Panjshiri-Tajik stronghold they have there.

Does that answer your question?

Q Yes, sir. Thank you.

SEAMAN SELBY: And Josh, did you have any follow-up?

COL. HAYNES: One thing I -- SEAMAN SELBY: Oh, I'm sorry, sir.

COL. HAYNES: One thing I didn't mention -- and I should have mentioned it in my opening statement -- is, I'm sure you guys are familiar with PRTs, Provincial Reconstruction Teams. And we are starting our own PRT -- we, the ANA and 201st Corps. And they've met several times, and they're starting to manage some of their own development projects working with contractors and some assistance on the ETT side.

But that's another great step in fighting this COIN operation, is understanding development, giving the people reason for hope. Prosperity, employment and, of course, security is the key to counterinsurgency. You know, it's a competition for the population.

And we're encouraged to see the Afghan national army and the 201st Corps step out and form their own PRT and start to fully grasp the importance of development and also connect with the various, what I call, developmental enablers in this country, be it USAID or the NGOs or other Afghan ministries.

But it's very encouraging to see the ANA taking that step toward development and just not being single-focused on kinetics. I wanted to add that in for everybody.

SEAMAN SELBY: Thank you, sir.

Josh, did you have any follow-up questions?

Q Yes, I do.

Sir, this is sort of a direct follow-up to my first question. Would you say with the, with -- as security is expanded in populated areas, would you say that the enemy has been falling back on more remote, higher-elevation, less populated areas? And, and can they sustain operations from that sort of terrain into the future?

COL. HAYNES: Well, I do believe, as we push into more and more populated areas, even though some of them may be further out, and a lot of the

fight here and the population of course is associated to the valleys, because the valley is where the water is and the roads and et cetera.

But as we push more and more to these valleys and establish security, particularly when you get in the extreme reaches of the valleys as they kind of go uphill, so to speak, the insurgents have to go to the higher ground of course. And up there, it's harder to get water. It's harder to get food.

And if they go in even higher altitudes, of course, the snowpack is going to last up there longer. And if they stay up there this winter, we're going to go after them.

The 101st Airborne has made it very clear that we're going to continue to fight. We're not going to talk in terms of fighting seasons per se. And we're going to continue to fight in the future and obviously the immediate future being the wintertime.

And I'd like to take an opportunity, now that I mentioned the 101, to talk about partnering a little bit. And the 101st Airborne, RC-East, Regional Command-East, is working very, very closely with my ETTs and the ANA and 201st Corps.

We're making a lot of progress there as far as partnership and conducting operations together. But I would like to add, in light of a lot of discussion we're hearing, here in Afghanistan, is that it's very important that we do not over-partner and create a needy Afghan army that's going to be too reliant on the coalition.

I mean, the coalition is very well-resourced and a very rich army, if you're an Afghan looking at all the stuff the coalition force shows up with.

Where we're having our best success is where new units coming out of the training pipeline partner for a short period of time to really see what right looks like, particularly in technical areas like reconnaissance, artillery or engineering, and then after some initial partnering they break out on their own -- the ANA -- just with their ETTs and conduct their own operations. We're seeing a lot of good things there.

Where we're not seeing good things is where we co-locate ANA and Army for too long -- and the ANA is a little too willing, in my opinion, and the -- and the, you know, the great coalition guys are also too willing to take the fight. And sometimes the ANA end up sitting on the sidelines. And I'm obviously against that, being a guy that's over here to develop and mentor the ANA.

SEAMAN SELBY: Thank you, sir. And Troy, did you have a follow- up?

Q I sure did. Sir, just for my own frame of reference -- so I know how to shape my questions -- how long have you been on the ground or how long have you been there in 201st, I guess, if you don't mind me asking?

COL. HAYNES: February.

Q Okay.

COL. HAYNES: February of this year. We're on a nine-month tour.

Q Right, right.

COL. HAYNES: And most of my Marine portion of this 700-man organization -- there's about 150 Marines and sailors -- were all from 3rd Marine Division and 3 MEF headquarter out of Okinawa in Hawaii.

And this is an enduring mission for 3 MEF. I know my last three predecessors and my next two successors, so we have a lot of institutional knowledge within the division, the MEF, about this particular mission. And it's a highly sought-after mission. A lot of guys volunteer to come out here and do this kind of work. Q Roger, roger. Yes. Yeah, when I was on the ground there -- when they moved and consolidated all the Marines up in 201st and they were scattered all over -- and we thought it was a good move at the time, versus having them farmed out all over to different Army units, to be in one concise, somewhat, chain of command and they could talk the same -- talk the same language a lot better.

So I guess one question that I have is the 205th Corps, they've been fielding M-16s and humvees pretty rapidly, I guess. I've been talking to Colonel McGrath and those guys down there. Have you seen that? has the 201st started that yet? And if so, how has that went (sic)?

COL. HAYNES: We have not started beyond a lot of initial planning -- you know, how we're going to do the exchange of weapons and field the vehicles, where we're going to store ammo, how we're going to do the maintenance piece. In fact, I took my first brief on that this week.

We will start -- we've already started to train the trainer piece on the humvees, the UAHs coming in. But we'll start fielding in the next -- probably around December. I don't have that information in front of me. We'll start December. And I personally pushed hard to do this in the winter when the enemy -- not us, but the enemy -- slows down a little bit because -- you know, because of the passage and everything. And we felt that was a more appropriate time to incorporate M-16s and UAHs.

Back to your other point, though, I can't let that go, about putting all the Marines in 201st Corps. I was the operations officer at 3rd Marine Division. We were behind that move and we are very, very pleased with having all the Marines within 201st. We have a great relationship with the 201st Corps. Sometimes they call themselves the Marine Corps. I've flown their staff over to Okinawa a couple times to meet and see a division staff in action. And it's been very, very gratifying to see the 201st Corps grow as we also on the Marine side get better at this mission as we understand the COIN environment and the population, the terrain, et cetera, more.

Q Thank you, sir. Appreciate that.

SEAMAN SELBY: Okay. And anybody else with any follow-up questions?

Q Yeah. Chuck. Sir, can you fill us in on the numbers for the -- (inaudible) -- 201st?

COL. HAYNES: For what on the 201st? I'm sorry.

Q The numbers. How many troops. The basic structure of the corps.

COL. HAYNES: (Off mike) -- thousand.

Q I'm sorry?

COL. HAYNES: Approximately 11,000 personnel in the 201st Corps, broken down into three brigades: one brigade headquartered here at Policharki, along with the corps headquarters east of Kabul about a 20- minute drive from the airport; 1st Brigade south of town; and 2nd Brigade headquartered out of Jalalabad and operate in the Eastern Zone. Q And do they have -- their helicopter support, is that corps support or is that from the air force?

COL. HAYNES: It's from the ANA air corps. And the helicopters we use in 201st are primarily positioned at Kabul International, on, obviously, the Afghan side. And they provide support. We're not pushing them to high -- real high altitudes yet, although we did the (helo-borne assault ?) up to about 8,000 feet and the MI-17s. But generally we're operating in and around Kabul. Occasionally I'll fly out or we'll send folks out to Jalalabad and up to -- excuse me, up the Kunar River some.

Q Thank you.

SEAMAN SELBY: And any more follow-up questions?

Q Yes. This is Troy Steward again. I got a couple, if I could.

SEAMAN SELBY: Sure.

Q Sir, what do you think the reason -- or what have you seen for the recent increase in violence in the Wardak province, which has been pretty substantial in the last few months versus in past history? Any feelings on it or anything you've seen as far as what would justify or explain why we've seen that?

COL. HAYNES: Well, Wardak province is complex terrain. If you've been out there, it's -- the base of Wardak province, if I recall, is 6(,000) to 7,000 feet, and that's the bottom part -- I mean, that's the low end of Wardak and it goes up from there, very mountainous.

The population is generally along Highway 1, with some roads pushing out to the west. We had some violence with the Hazaras there and the Kuchis a couple of months ago that the corps had to send troops in there and kind of sort that out and help achieve a peaceful solution finally there. And quite frankly, with the lack of ANA forces we have in that area and coalition, I mean, you just can't be everywhere out there. And the way these guys operate, they operate in the shadows and in small groups and try to infiltrate into villages, and that takes a lot of presence to counter that kind of enemy activity.

And I believe that's one reason that our senior decision-makers are requesting, and in some cases being granted, additional forces for the greater Kabul and Eastern Zone areas.

Q Okay. So you think it was just -- I mean, before it was kind of considered a truck stop or a pass-through on the way to Kabul, because it's right there on the south side before you head down the mountains. You think it's just that the ACM forces realized that and realized there pretty much was no coverage, and it gave them an easy moving maneuver area just on the outskirts of Kabul, to also give them some IO campaign? COL. HAYNES: If I was the enemy,

I would probably see it something about like that. You know, you got light -- you got light forces out there. COM ISAF has requested more forces.

They know we're light out there. They know it's close to Kabul. I mean, it makes sense for the insurgent to try to do something out there. He's not near as capable and big as he sounds, though. I mean, he's got a robust IO campaign that makes him, you know, seem larger than life, but he's not.

Q Roger, sir. Just kind of like -- kind of like the bully in the school yard, right? Talks a lot of smack, but if you go nose to nose, they usually back down.

COL. HAYNES: Yeah. Yeah, that's about it. And our Marines and other advisors have -- (inaudible) -- that.

Q Roger, roger. Since you said were there in February, I imagine you worked a lot -- often with the 82nd. And you know, the ETTs -- when the 82nd came in, General Rodriguez was successful in getting the ETTs OPCON to the 82nd when they had RC East. I'm wondering, has that -- has that relationship carried over? Are you still OPCON to the 101st? And if so, how is the working relationship different from working with the 82nd to working with the 101st?

COL. HAYNES: Well, you know, I like both of them. I mean, I knew General Rodriguez in Iraq and 82nd guys, great staff. I'd stop in and see them at Bagram and they'd stop in Policharki and we would do some planning together. Task Force Bayonet, Colonel Preysler, Task Force Rock, I mean, there's some great organizations who are running around with Marines and ANA and soldiers, doing great things.

And now with the 101st Airborne, we have a close relationship with them. We know -- many of us know each other personally and operate and plan together. And they fully get COIN -- not that they need me to grade their paper or anything -- but they fully understand COIN and what this fight's all about and ANA development is part of that.

But the Marines have never been OPCON. All right? I'm only OPCON to MARCENT. That's kind of a myth. There have -- there was a document that talked about OPCON of Guard and other -- National Guard and other type of ETTs, but Marine forces only go TACON to the theater commander, normally, and that's no -- nothing different here. I'm TACON to CSTC-A and Task Force Phoenix and I'm only OPCON to my three- star headquarters out of different locations -- Bahrain, Tampa or Pendleton -- all right -- MARCENT out of Tampa, primarily. Q Okay, sir. Thanks for clearing that up. That explains it.

I'll give a chance for someone else to ask for -- ask him --

SEAMAN SELBY: Okay. Did anybody else have any follow-ups?

Q No. I appreciate -- (inaudible).

SEAMAN SELBY: And sir, with that, do you have any closing comments today?

COL. HAYNES: Yeah. I'd like to, to close out with thanking, thanking you all for your interest.

This ETT mission is, to me, strategically important. Our coalition can't be everywhere. We're only going to win this fight, in my opinion, if we demand and get more out of our Afghan national army. Others will say the police. That's equally important. But I'm in the Afghan national army development business so I'll stay there.

If we can get more out of the Afghan national army, we will continue to make progress here. We'll need less coalition in the long run. Of course, certainly, we need more right now for obvious reasons. And lastly this is, this is dangerous business.

I've had, out of the Marines here, nine Purple Hearts and three killed in action; lost three great Americans a couple weeks ago. So condolences out to the family of Captain Jesse Melton, Doc Strickland and First Lieutenant Nic Madrazo. Just want to close with that. Our thoughts and prayers are with their families.

SEAMAN SELBY: Thank you very much, sir.

And thank you to all the bloggers on the line. This program will be available online at the Bloggers Link on dod.mil, where you will be able to access a story based on today's call, along with source documents such as the audio file and print transcript.

Again thank you, Colonel Haynes and our blog participants. That concludes today's event. Feel free to disconnect at any time.

END.